

Chapter Three

"I Have a Dream Too": Pat Parker

Pat Parker was named one of the "50 Most Influential People in Gay and Lesbian Literature" in the 1980s by *Lambda Book Report*, called "a giant voice of early Lesbian feminism" by Judy Grahn, and considered by many the first African American lesbian and one of the first lesbian poets to acknowledge her sexual identity in public poetry readings. No less a black lesbian luminary than activist-publisher-writer Barbara Smith avows that "Pat Parker's poetry is the first explicitly Black lesbian feminist writing I remember reading" (*Movement* 1999:39).¹ Yet Parker and her work are far less well known than the other poets under study here, even among lesbian feminists, especially among academics. Parker's more than full-time commitment to activism and her coparenting of two children likely contributed to the fact that she published only three chapbooks in the 1970s and two bound volumes of poetry between 1978 and her death of breast cancer, at age forty-five, in 1989. *Movement in Black* (1978) collects Parker's poems, mostly from the chapbooks: *Child of Myself* (1972), *Pit Stop* (1973), and *Womanslaughter* (1978). *Jonestown and Other Madness* (1985) is a slim bound volume of eleven poems. More than infrequent publishing contributes to Parker's relative obscurity, however. Parker did not fit neatly into preexisting categories of identity, genre, or political ideology—nor did she want to. A revolutionary activist whose poetry overlaps the categories of African American, lesbian, and feminist literary traditions, Parker expressed a multifaceted, politically situated identity that calls into question the orthodoxies of every movement in which she participated. Her multi-issue agenda and complex statements about identity prefigure outspoken, organized U.S. "Third World" feminism by nearly a decade. They echo in theoretical statements by contemporary queer academics that challenge heterosexual norms and static identity politics. And they show beyond doubt that at least some lesbian feminists—and

a prominent some—flew in the face of the image of a white, middle-class lesbian-feminist politics and constituency.

Evelyn C. White's observation that Parker "pushed, shoved, and fisticuffed her voice into the lesbian feminist movement" (*Movement* 1999:43) testifies to the racism that has existed there, as in the women's movement in general, the queer movement, and the larger society. But Nancy Bereano's observation about the staying power of Parker's poetry fleshes out the story; she notes that the volume "has had almost as many lives as the proverbial cat." *Movement in Black* fell out of print twice because of financial hard times for alternative presses, but it was published in various editions by three different publishers in 1978, 1983, 1989, and most recently in an expanded edition in 1999 (*Movement* 1999:frontispiece), keeping the earliest poems in print on and off for nearly thirty years.

Relatively few references to Parker were made in print before 1989, but after her untimely death both black and white lesbian feminists commented on her powerful influence on their lives, work, communities, and political movements. African American writers and activists, especially, credited Parker as a "mentor" (Folayan, "Gifts"). The Washington, D.C. group Black Women Together organized a memorial performance in honor of Parker, "to say thank-you, Pat" and publicly "acknowledge the difference your work has made in our lives." Stormy Webber read her poem "Praises to the Spirit of Pat Parker!" at the tribute, mourning "a death in the family" and acknowledging "ancestor you left us / yr strong tools / a trail clearly marked / yr precious words-." Novelist Ann Allen Shockley wrote that "as a forerunner, Pat paved the way and served as a model for younger black lesbian poets to come forth and have their voices heard in rage, joy, beauty, and song" ("Black Women Together").

Jewelle Gomez, an African American lesbian writer and activist, praised Parker for having "the courage" to be "the 'first black,' the 'first lesbian,' the first everything" (Gomez, "First"). Indeed, several tributes, biographical notes, and reviews, including one written by Parker's friend Audre Lorde, refer to her as a "visionary" (Blain, Clements, and Grundy, *Feminist Companion*, 833; Folayan, "Gifts"; Lorde, "Foreword"; Oktenberg, "Quarter"; Stato, "Pat Parker"). One memorial tribute speaks to Parker's power to help others envision themselves with pride: "She . . . convinced us (lesbians) we were the stuff of poetry" (Stato, "Pat Parker," 31). Given the nationwide outpouring of recognition and praise that followed the San Francisco Bay Area poet's death, it is not surprising that the board of the Women's Building of San Francisco considered naming a room after her in 1993.² New York City

beat Parker's hometown to the punch: the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center library in Manhattan is named after Parker and gay film historian Vito Russo.

Parker had a penchant for "publicly asking dangerous questions" (Folayan, "Gifts"), a willingness to speak "forcefully on behalf of those who *could* not speak for themselves" and to rage "at those who *would* not" (Brimstone, "Pat Parker," 6), and a commitment to liberation for "all sides of herself: she was a revolutionary, Black, working class, lesbian/feminist poet, and she refused to keep quiet" (Gregg 12). Parker confronted and often angered people with her relentless critique of any racist, sexist, homophobic, and/or classist status quo (M. Wolfe, "Interview" and personal communication 1997). White admiringly calls Parker a "big bold bad-to-the-bone Black lesbian" (*Movement* 1999:43). Michelle Parkerson notes Parker's multi-issue politics, which sound commonplace today because the path was forged by Parker and others in the 1970s: "Racial identity and vigilance against racism were as central to Parker's writing as her love of women and her defiance against sexism and homophobia. . . . She wrote brilliantly of the jeopardy and joy of Black lesbian life" (*Movement* 1999:35). Angela Davis states clearly that Parker's "poetry and activism foreshadowed and helped to forge the cultural and political values that continue to inspire so many of us. . . . Contemporary poets, musicians, and political activists, including those who may not be familiar with Pat Parker's work, work on a terrain that resonates with her pioneering voice" (*Movement* 1999:28). Theorists, too.

In "Pat Parker: Feminism in Postmodernity," Dymphna Callaghan terms Parker's work "poetry for the nineties" (128). Callaghan discusses Parker's poem "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend" (*Movement*, 68) in theoretical terms applicable to Parker's oeuvre as a whole: "It provokes an awareness about reading African American lesbian 'otherness' without colonising it by ignoring, dispensing with, or overemphasising the poet's gender, sexual preference and ethnicity" (129). Callaghan's project is to show the "important ways" in which Parker's work "intersects" with the "debate" over "the designation 'Third World.' . . . Parker's poetry both exemplifies and resists the concerns of contemporary postcolonial writing where the subject, the i/I of Parker's poem, is a nexus of complex power relations produced by social institutional formations" (129–30).³ Parker opens "For the white person" by confronting readers with a contradiction that defies easy resolution: "The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black. / Second, you must never forget that i'm Black" (ll. 1–2). Stanzas 2 through 5 challenge white people to see beyond common stereotypical associations between

African American people and soul music, soul food, violence, and sexual prowess. When "you" rely on these stereotypes, Parker writes, "It makes me wonder if you're foolish" (l. 15). In the closing stanza Parker plays on a last racist stereotype, inverting it, and questioning the integrity of "the white person": "In other words—if you really want to be my friend—*don't* / make a labor of it. I'm lazy. Remember" (ll. 18–19).

Emily Culpepper emphasizes that Parker's poems have "a genius for putting the emphasis where it belongs." She describes the effectiveness of "For the Straight Folks" (*Movement*, 111–12), which Culpepper used to end a lecture in which she "taught lesbian material to a huge lecture course for the first time, struggling with smirking alienated jocks and whispering flirting frat members" ("Genius"). The opening lines of Parker's penultimate stanza—"Fact is, blatant heterosexuals / are all over the place" (ll. 40–41)—"named the reality in the classroom and they did, yes they did, know what hit them. That is consciousness-raising" (Culpepper, "Genius"). There is nothing subtle about this poem; it exposes the "blatant" hypocrisy of heterosexism by hammering the point home at the end of stanzas 3 through 9 in capital letters:

Have you met the woman
 who's shocked by 2 women kissing
 & in the same breath,
 tells you that she's pregnant?
 BUT GAYS SHOULDN'T BE BLATANT. (ll. 5–9)

The irony, and the injustice, is that "blatant" heterosexuality is taken for granted, not marked as "sexual" because it is the dominant norm. In the last stanza, Parker tells offended heterosexuals that she will go back into the closet, on one condition, "after you" (l. 52).

"For the Straight Folks" is recorded on "Lesbian Concentrate," a 1977 album of songs and poems by lesbians responding to Anita Bryant's homophobic campaign to "Save Our Children" from "blatant" homosexuals. (Diana Press, the publisher of *Womanslaughter*, in which "For the Straight Folks" was first published, called it "the poem Anita Bryant made famous" in an advertisement for the book in 1978.) "For the Straight Folks" is one of many examples of a lesbian feminist challenging heterosexism some fifteen years before queer theory recast the issue as a theoretically complex problematizing of "heteronormativity." As Culpepper laments, Parker's "feminist theory-making in and out of academia . . . has been overlooked by too many

sisters. . . . If we reduce our vision to stargazing, we fail to expand our conception of the varied forms in which ideas are developed" ("Genius").

Parker was instrumental in developing both lesbian-feminist poetry and lesbian feminism, a movement that, along with gay liberation, had grown strong enough to attract national attention from the likes of homophobic legislators and the former Miss America by the end of the 1970s. Parker and Grahm met in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1969, and from then throughout the early 1970s they "*often* read together as a pair" (Grahm, in Aal, "Judy Grahm on Women's Poetry," 69). Along with Grahm, Alta, and Susan Griffin, Parker drew together communities of women who assembled for lesbian poetry readings on the West Coast. Grahm explains that she and Parker "both knew it was impossible for us to enter the world of poetry—and consequently we invented another world of poetry, and became peers, and leaders, and friends" (Grahm, "Introduction," 15).⁴ In an interview in 1985 Parker described how her early readings with Grahm functioned in much the same way as did early consciousness-raising groups, helping to create lesbian-feminist culture:

When Judy and I started, we read mostly in small places like bookstores and coffeehouses, but there was an exhilaration because we were laying ground. There was no women's culture to speak of. The musicians we have now didn't exist. We had no validation for ourselves, for the culture, for anything. It was like pioneering—we'd go out into these places and stand up to read poems. We were talking to women about women, and, at the same time, letting women know that the experiences they were having were shared by other people. . . .

If I die tomorrow, I die knowing I put my foot in a place where no one had stepped before. At that time people were not out writing poems about being lesbians. It simply wasn't done. Or, if they did, it was clothed in so many similes and metaphors that you had to take a shovel to find it. People were still writing poems and changing the pronouns. (Rushin, "Pat Parker," 28)

A Movement of Working-Class Poets

Like Grahm's poetry, Parker's work deals with class as well as gender and sexuality. In her autobiographical narrative poem "Goat Child" (*Movement*, 19–30) Parker illustrates the roots of her class politics. She describes her father, "typical / spade businessman / too much credit—too little capital" (ll.

23–25). She grew up in "what is now / suburbs of Houston only / it had weeds and space" (ll. 27–29):

one room—tin roof playhouse
with tarzan-making beams,
tin #2 washtub, maggot-filled
outhouse and super rats / (ll. 35–38)

She remembers being punished in second grade for stealing a notebook" (l. 75) from "the / doctor's son who could / afford it easy" (ll. 79–81). In the sardonic nursery rhyme "Dialogue" (*Movement*, 51–52), Parker contrasts the narrator's adult political observations with her mother's assurances that the world is safe and just. Parker writes as a poor person, "Working my whole life away, / trying to join a higher class, / & living in utter decay" (ll. 18–20).

In other poems, Parker creates working-class and poor characters to comment on economic hierarchies in the United States. Reminiscent of Grahn's *Common Woman*, "there is a woman in this town" (*Movement*, 154–57) chronicles a number of women, though Parker's characters exist on the fringes of the women's movement and the local lesbian community, including one who "was locked up" (l. 47), one who "fills her veins with dope / goes from house to house to sleep / borrows money wherever she can / . . . / none of us have trusted her" (ll. 56–63), and another, by contrast, who "owns her own business / . . . some say she is a capitalist / some say she has no consciousness / none of us trust her" (ll. 29–35). In "Movement in Black" (*Movement*, 86–93) Parker celebrates African American women's lives and achievements; in addition to named heroines past and present from Phillis Wheatley to Edmonia Lewis, many of whom were poor, Parker memorializes unnamed slaves, western pioneers, modern political activists, and a series of what Grahn would call "common" women:

I'm the southerner
who went north
I'm the northerner
who went down home

I'm the teacher
in the all Black school
I'm the graduate
who cannot read

I'm the social worker
in the city ghetto
I'm the car hop
in a delta town

I'm the junkie with a jones
I'm the dyke in the bar
I'm the matron at county jail
I'm the defendant with nothin' to say.

I'm the woman with 8 kids
I'm the woman who didn't have any
I'm the woman who poor as sin
I'm the woman who's got plenty.

I'm the woman who
raised white babies &
taught my kids to
raise themselves. (ll. 119–42)

Performed in five voices—Parker's, and four African American women's from the community in which she happened to be reading—this choral poem creates a dramatic community of diverse characters who chant, "I am the Black woman / I am a survivor" (ll. 191–92). It is this poem that most indelibly impressed Parker's audiences. Tribute after tribute to Parker mentions "Movement in Black." Jewelle Gomez, who participated in a mid-eighties performance, referred to it as a "ritual" that "gave others a glimmer of possibility for growth and change" (*Movement* 1999:30).

A third type of class-related poem comments directly on government policies and actions that create or reinforce economic inequality. "Where do you go to become a non-citizen?" (*Movement*, 61–62) expresses disgust with government excess and indifference to poverty, among other injustices. Each stanza concludes with a refrain unusual for such a committed activist as Parker (though one frequently heard in anti-establishment circles, to be sure): "I wanna resign; I want out." "The Law" (*Movement*, 139–40), like "Dialogue," reflects Parker's adult realization that, despite what she was taught in her youth, the powers that be discriminate, often on the basis of economic status.

the law
comes to homes

& takes the poor
 for traffic tickets
 the law
 takes people to jail
 for stealing food
 the law
 comes in mini-skirts
 to see if your home
 is bare enough
 for welfare (ll. 15–26)

Parker worked at various times as a waitress, proofreader, maid, clerk, and writing instructor, and put in over sixty hours a week as medical coordinator and board member of the Oakland Feminist Women's Health Center from 1978 until 1987, when she resigned to have more time to write (Blain, Clements, and Grundy, *Feminist Companion*; Folayan and Byrd, "Pat Parker," 415; Kinsman, *Contemporary Authors*; Rushin, "Pat Parker," 29). Parker remarked in an interview following the release of *Jonestown and Other Madness* in 1985, "If I could get someone to give me \$10,000 to live on for a year, I'd probably come out at the end of that year with at least three books" (Rushin, "Pat Parker," 29). In her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde explains why "poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women. A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time" (116).

Revolutionizing Traditions: Poetry, Critics, and the Black Aesthetic

While Grahn and Parker performed together as working class-identified lesbian feminists in the early 1970s, Parker's poetry also insistently confronted racism, an issue that Grahn addressed directly only in "A Woman Is Talking to Death." Grahn explains that Parker was unique in 1969 for more than just speaking openly as a lesbian: Parker "had come through already two or three Movements by the time lesbian-feminism was beginning to develop, and she helped develop it" (Aal, "Judy Grahn on Women's Poetry," 69). She "[got] up and [said] what had never, before, anywhere, been said . . . about women, about lesbianism, about Blacks and whites living under a racist and sexist regime which strikes out from every side as well as from above" (Grahn,

"Introduction," 11). In the same way that Grahn preceded Adrienne Rich as the preeminent white lesbian-feminist poet, Parker preceded Audre Lorde, who is placed at the center of most discussions of African American lesbian writers. Lorde was undoubtedly one of the poets who impressed Parker in the early 1970s (Grahn, "Introduction," 12), but the reverse was also true, and Parker clearly influenced Lorde's decision to publish and speak openly as a lesbian. Lorde writes that she worried about Parker after meeting her in 1969 and reading her "merciless and vulnerable and far-ranging" poems over the next few years (*Movement*, 10).⁵ In her foreword to Parker's *Movement in Black*, Lorde writes, "These poems would not need any introduction except for the racism and heterosexism of a poetry establishment which has whited out Parker from the recognition" she deserves (*Movement*, 9).

Parker started writing when she was a child, and her first published poem appeared in 1963 in *Negro Digest* under the name P. A. Bullins. At the time (1962–1966, from age eighteen to twenty-two), she was married to the playwright Ed Bullins, who was the cofounder and cultural director of the Black Arts Alliance associated with the San Francisco Black Panther Party and briefly the minister of culture of the party. Parker had been a prose writer before marrying Bullins, but, she explained, she turned to poetry because Bullins "was a prose writer, and he used to *tear up* my prose! I'd write a story and he would *rip it apart!* . . . Criticism, you know? And then I decided I would begin writing poetry because he didn't know anything about that" (Cornwell, "Pat Parker," 41).

Like Bullins, Parker was active in the Black Panther Party, and she was influenced by the Black Arts poets. When Grahn asked Parker in the 1970s to name poets who had had an impact on her work, Parker "handed [Grahn] a small pile of paperbound books by poets, all of them Black, two thirds of them women" and added Grahn's name to the list. Most of the small paperbacks were published by independent black presses, "especially Dudley Randall's Broadside Press in Detroit, and the Third World Press from Chicago, extremely important sources of contemporary Black writing." Grahn sees traces of Black Arts poets Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni in Parker's work, particularly their "vital insistence on speaking a people's art, instead of an elite or academic art" (Grahn, "Introduction," 12–13)—trade-marks of the Black Aesthetic. Lee "not only celebrated blackness but wrote a number of poems exhorting those African Americans who were hesitant to act against racism to change" (Seibles, "Quilt," 182); Sanchez was among the black women poets who "constituted a formidable phalanx of the consciousness-raising activities of the 1960s" (Hernton, "Sexual Mountain," 198).

Many of the Black Arts writers of the 1960s repudiated earlier African American literature, considering it not "black" enough—that is, because the sixties militants thought that earlier writers had assimilated to white cultural and critical standards (Smith, "Black Arts," 96–8). Timothy Seibles, however, traces the notion of a Black Aesthetic back to Paul Laurence Dunbar, whom he considers the first notable African American writer to address "subjects directly relating to the experiences of black Americans," and to do so using black vernacular (or "what might be called 'Slave English'") in the 1890s ("Quilt," 158–59). But it was the gay Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes, one of the poets whom Grahn notes as an influence on Parker, whom Seibles considers to have been "the primary proponent of the black literary aesthetic in America" by 1927 (Morse and Larkin, *Gay and Lesbian*, 204–6; Grahn, "Introduction," 13; Seibles, "Quilt," 167). Reviewing Parker's *Jonestown and Other Madness* in 1985, Alicia Oktenberg compares Parker to Hughes: "The body of her work rivals none except the work of Langston Hughes. He used to be called 'the poet laureate of the Negro people.' Parker can be called 'the poet laureate of the Black and Lesbian peoples'" ("Quartet," 17).

Parker clearly was part of and influenced by the movement of Black Arts poets, many of whom did not consider the writers of the Harlem Renaissance sufficiently militant. As Seibles points out, however, the Black Arts poets, with their conviction that "black was unequivocally beautiful," were "riding the momentum of the struggle for a true identity—begun, for the most part, in the twenties" ("Quilt," 181). Parker clearly acknowledged this longer lineage of politicized African American writers; according to Grahn, in addition to militant black poets of the 1960s and Langston Hughes, Parker particularly admired Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry, and Zora Neale Hurston (Grahn, "Introduction," 13). In the "Roll call" section of "Movement in Black," Parker includes the writers Phillis Wheatley, Frances E. W. Harper, and Hurston.

The Black Aesthetic explicitly informs the style and content of much African American literature and art, especially after 1960. Whereas earlier black poets at times may have been "more willing to ask politely for justice and hope for the best" (Seibles, "Quilt," 181), the Black Arts poets rejected white academic and critical standards, expressed rage at white people and white society generally, incorporated the "style and rhythms and colors of the ghetto" (Hoyt Fuller, quoted in Smith, "Black Arts," 95), took rhythmic cues from black music, notably jazz and blues, turned to specific black role models as diverse as Malcolm X and James Brown (Smith, "Black Arts," 95–100),

and celebrated Africa as the true "Motherland" (Seibles, "Quilt," 183). In short, Black Aesthetic theory, articulated in the 1960s by such writers as Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Gayle Addison, and Larry Neal, called for "ground[ing] literature in black vernacular culture" (Smith, "Black Arts," 101), much like contemporary hip hop music.

Several of Parker's poems employ language that could be considered part (though not exclusively) urban black vernacular: the "ain'ts" of "My Lady Ain't No Lady" (*Movement*, 113); the informal, often humorous, diction of "i wonder" ("i wonder / how many matches it would take, / to lay a single-file trail / from here—/ to richard nixon's ass," ll. 1–6, *Movement*, 60) or "For the Straight Folks" ("you know some people / got a lot of nerve"); the cursing in "The *What* Liberation Front?" a poem about her dog "fuck[ing] in the streets" (l. 17, *Movement*, 71); or the culturally specific "childhood chants" recalled in "Group" ("if you're white—alright / if you're brown—stick around / if you're Black—get back," ll. 12–14, *Movement*, 136–38). Several of the poems refer to "blackness," specifically African American experiences and perspectives: black women being told they're ugly because their "lips are too big," "hair is nappy," skin is too dark, or "nose is too big" ("Group"); the alcoholism that victimizes impoverished ghetto communities ("Pit Stop," *Movement*, 104–9); pride in defiant ancestors ("Movement in Black"); or the "chains" of modern racism that remain from chattel slavery ("Questions," *Movement*, 79–82).

The characteristic of the Black Aesthetic that is most obvious in Parker's work is a reliance on black oral tradition, not just in vernacular language but in the very form of the poems. Barbara Smith explains that Parker's work is "very much in the Black oral tradition which relies on inflection, metaphor, irony, and humor to deepen our communication and make it specifically ours" ("Naming," 99). Pamela Annas notes the "oral storytelling tradition" apparent in Parker's "Pit Stop," a poem spoken by a jaded but self-aware "bar habitué," and she points out that "some of Parker's poems are jokes or anecdotes" ("Poetry," 21). Certainly, the erotic poem "For Willyce" (*Movement*, 102) with its humorous and political punch line—like Grahn's "If you lose your lover" and "parting on the left"—falls into the "joke" category:

When i make love to you
i try
with each stroke of my tongue
to say i love you
to tease i love you
to hammer i love you

to melt i love you
 & your sounds drift down
 oh god!
 oh jesus!
 and i think—
 here it is, some dude's
 getting credit for what
 a woman
 has done,
 again.

"A Small Contradiction" (*Movement*, 123) sends up the early lesbian-feminist belief in principled nonmonogamy with a similarly well-timed punch line:

Me, i am
 totally opposed to
 monogamous relationships
 unless
 i'm
 in love. (ll. 12–17)

Ayofemi Stowe Folayan and Stephanie Byrd observe that "the very nature of Parker's narrative poems springs from her 'race education' in Texas and the oral traditions of African American people who supplemented this education with stories that have gone unwritten" ("Pat Parker," 417). Parker wrote and spoke many otherwise "unwritten" stories—of a variety of African American women in "Movement in Black," of bar dykes in "Pit Stop," and of victims of domestic violence in "Womanslaughter," for example (*Movement*, 141–50). The fact that "Movement in Black," though printed in a book, was conceived (and primarily successful) as a performance piece "is consistent with the Afro-American tradition of oral history" (Clarke, "Review," 223). Parker plays the role of the African griot, the "poet-philosopher-historian who kept the wisdom of the people from being lost over time," the woman who memorized and passed down complex genealogies and village histories (Seibles, "Quilt," 161).

Grahn and Wendy Cadden both liken Parker to a lawyer pleading a case; her use of repetition, revelation, and call and response is also clearly analogous to a southern black preacher (Grahn, "Introduction," 12; "Where Will You Be?"). Religious allusion figures into several of her poems, as title or epi-

graph—"Exodus" (*Movement*, 37), "from cavities of bones" (*Movement*, 45), "A Family Tree" (*Movement*, 55), "when i drink" (*Movement*, 110), and "when i was a child" (*Movement*, 152–53)—or as image or point of reference—baptism in "Goat Child," bigoted religious fervor in "Where Will You Be?" (*Movement*, 74–78), her mother's faith in God in "Dialogue," and her mother's repeated question in "My lover is a woman": "Lord, what kind of child is this?" (*Movement*, 98–100). Biblical allusion and the oratory style of the black church are historically significant to antiracist poetry in part because church services were the only large communal gatherings of African Americans allowed during slavery. Because it was a punishable offense to teach slaves to read and write, the black church was based entirely on oral forms rather than reading of Scripture. After abolition, preachers were among the first literate African Americans in most communities, and their ability to affect congregations with their oratory style was of paramount importance (Seibles, "Quilt," 160–61).

African American poets at least as far back as Langston Hughes constructed poems on the framework of "the call-and-response ('A-men!') rhythms of the black church" (Seibles, "Quilt," 167). As African American poets in the 1960s became more politicized about not only the content but also the form of their poems, black oral traditions such as call and response were more widely and explicitly invoked. Seibles explains that "most poems were secular sermons, direct calls to social consciousness and action, with the 'amen' response typical of the church congregation being replaced by the 'right on' of the streetwise." Seibles's comment that most Black Arts poetry "was written to be spoken, shouted, and preached" echoes in references to Parker as "a visionary, a preacher, and a pedagogue" and to her persuasive voice that could "preach/shout a poem or leisurely caress it" (Culpepper, "Genius Folayan and Byrd, 'Pat Parker,'" 417; Seibles, "Quilt," 181).

Nearly all commentators on Parker agree that her poetry needs to be heard, not just read. Cheryl Clarke is right to point to the connection between Parker's work and "what young urban people now call *spoken word* art" (*Movement* 1999:20). Tributes refer to Parker's "stunning" oral performance, "her dynamic presence," and "the magic of [her] voice" (Callaghan, "Pat Parker," 132; Culpepper, "Genius"; Folayan, "Gifts"). That Parker at times performed with musicians (such as Gwen Avery, Avotcja, Linda Tillery, and Mary Watkins) and incorporated refrains, rhythms, and rhymes associated with music into her work augmented the auditory impact of her poetry. Barbara Smith, an obvious admirer of Parker's work, admits that she disliked Parker's poems until hearing them, but afterward testifies that Parker's read-

ing of a particular poem "makes even more vivid the searing feelings which inspired it" (Smith, "Naming," 102). Gerald Barrax, a reviewer who belittles Parker's work, allows that it could be a "crowd pleaser" when read aloud, going so far as to call "Movement in Black" "incantatory" ("Six Poets," 260). Barrax, who dislikes Parker's work qua poetry, notices that the poems in "Liberation Fronts," the second section of *Movement in Black*, employ "incantatory rhythms, topical subject matter, and colloquial language" that make them "reminiscent of the 1960s when poetry often became public performance" ("Six Poets," 260). He misses the populist point of the Black Arts poets' emphasis on performance. They intended not "a lowering of standards of the muted word (i.e., text), [but rather] the recognition of the verbalized text" (Salaam and Ward, "Sayings," 117). Barrax, like many other academic critics, may recognize but does not value performance poetry in the black oral tradition.

Grahn, with her emphasis on the "use" of poetry, and her sense of how poetry readings can "energize" an audience and coalesce a community, clearly had learned from the same public performance movement that Parker had in the 1960s. Both undoubtedly were influenced by the Beat movement's improvised oral poetry, but the Black Arts movement seems a closer antecedent. African American Black Arts poets like Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones and Bob Kaufman had participated in the jazz-inflected Beat scene, but they split with the Beats in the 1960s and took the performance of poetry to new political and rhetorical heights. The rage unleashed by the events of the 1960s, epitomized by the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, led to a poetry whose energy, anger, and daring were fed by public audiences, whose emotional responses in turn pushed "revolutionist" poets such as Don L. Lee and Nikki Giovanni further (Seibles, "Quilt," 177, 182). The Black Aesthetic of the 1960s emphasized performance, with the intention of making literature "an immediate, communal form to be experienced in public" (Smith, "Black Arts," 101). Parker explained that "the point" was "to try to put the poetry in the language that we speak. . . . People forget that rhyme and meter passed down information long before we had pen and paper and books" (Rushin, "Pat Parker," 28).

As a result of their focus on public performance, poets like Parker paid more attention to sound than to formal patterns, and audiences were more likely to be impressed than were most critics. Parker remarked in 1985, "It's rare for me to get a critique of my work that's favorable." In fact, it was rare for Parker to get a critique of her work at all, especially outside of lesbian-feminist publications or by reviewers who were not African American. Cris South, one of the few white feminists to review *Movement in Black*, exem-

plifies Parker's sense of white reviewers' unwillingness to praise or criticize her work straightforwardly. Parker told an interviewer, "Some people say, 'I don't feel competent to critique this woman's work because she's Black, and I'm white'" (Rushin, "Pat Parker," 28). South spends the first one-third of her review elaborating on her self-absorbed opening sentences: "I am a white woman, a white woman writing a review of a black woman's poetry. And I haven't been able to forget that fact for a moment" (69). When she does turn to the poems, South barely discusses or evaluates them at all; instead, she focuses on the guilt they make her feel as a white woman who does not actively oppose racism.

As appreciated as Parker seems to have been, given the number and enthusiasm of tributes written after her death, academics and other critics were nearly as likely to ignore her work in the 1970s as they were in the 1990s. Despite her impact on lesbian activists and communities, Parker was snubbed by the professional makers of theory and literary canons, even alternative ones. Culpepper writes, "Was it racism or classism or sexism, she wryly wondered, that led folks to sometimes think that the plain speech in her poems meant they weren't hard to write?" or, one might ask, that they are intellectually unsophisticated? The Black Arts movement rejected "the dead forms taught most writers in the white man's schools" (Larry Neal, in Smith, "Black Arts," 100) and, in turn, was considered propaganda rather than art by most critics. David Lionel Smith suggests that the creation of new forms required by the rejection of white models left traditionally trained critics, including African American ones, ill-prepared to appreciate the protest poetry of the 1960s ("Black Arts," 102).⁶ He explains that the reliance on African American vernacular culture "demands of its reader (or listener) a sympathy and familiarity with black culture and black idioms—and in many cases, with black nationalist cultural politics as well" (102).

In other words, Black Arts poetry—or lesbian-feminist poetry, or any other movement literature—is not as transparent or accessible to all audiences as radical movement poets would insist. When Parker says that "people write in the language of their times, or should," or that she attempts to "put the poetry in the language we speak," everything turns on her definitions of "they" and "we" (Rushin, "Pat Parker," 28). While she expresses alienation from dominant culture's "criteria for what's a good poem," there also clearly are critics who feel shut out of radical movement values, allusions, and rhetorics. Many critics' alienation and disapprobation stems from political sympathies, however, not reading comprehension. Mainstream critics with a stake in the aesthetic and political status quo would be ill-disposed

to applaud any poetry with a radical message. The Black Arts movement, like the women's movement of the next decade, was easily caricatured by association with its most "egregious" extremes, examples of a "swaggering rhetoric of ethnic and gender chauvinism," of "crude, strident forms of nationalism" (Smith, "Black Arts," 93).

The charge that political poetry "confuses social theory with aesthetics" (Smith, "Black Arts," 93) was leveled at Parker's work on the rare occasion of an academic review. The reviewer of *Jonestown and Other Madness in Library Journal* seems to want to like Parker's poems, but labels them "at times . . . rhetorical," even though s/he concedes that "more often they are saved by Parker's sharp irony and her ability to relate political issues to events in her own life" (RR, "Review"). Gerald Barrax, reviewing *Movement in Black* in *Callaloo*, appears to appreciate Parker's poems in spite of his aesthetic and political inclinations, which lead him to undercut every positive comment he makes:

Much of this book is charged with the electricity of Parker's commitment to the causes of Blacks, women and gays. She is a writer of admirable intentions. . . . The poet's easy wit, humor and irony often give these poems an appeal and quirky twist without which they would be either mushy or strident. . . . ["Womanslaughter"] continues into a fourth part, and the poem is too long by about that much. Not willing to trust her poetry, Parker hammers home the point too didactically. . . . The poem ends not simply in justified grief or rage but in ringing phrases that threaten to tarnish the experience it has given us. ("Six Poets," 259–62)

In 1975, Parker referred to mainstream critical standards as "all a bunch of shit, academic wanderings. . . . There's so little poetry for us because look who sets the standards" (Woodwoman, "Pat Parker Talks," 61).

Indeed, when an African American lesbian critic is setting the standards, Parker's poetry fares better in a review. Even Cheryl Clarke—who calls some of Parker's poems "self-indulgen[t] . . . apoeitic, arrhythmic, and contrived," "ahistorical," "glaringly unedited, uneven, in need of revision"—spends most of her review of *Movement in Black* explicating how the book "enriches at once the tradition of black poetry and of women's poetry in America," "sharply demarcating the black lesbian poet's space in the hermetic world of Afro-American letters" (Clarke, "Review," 221, 222, 224, 217, 225). Where Cris South feels confronted and exposed as a white woman, black lesbian critics feel personally affirmed. Clarke, Barbara Smith, Becky Birtha—all three black

lesbian reviewers—slip into a sort of essentialist identity politics that Parker's corpus resists because it never ossifies into one static view of The Black Lesbian Feminist. Clarke writes that "all women, *particularly black women*, who experience Parker's poems will welcome her voice" ("Review," 217; emphasis added). Smith implies a felt affiliation with Parker's viewpoint in poems such as "Brother" (*Movement*, 46), "My lover is a woman," "Womanslaughter," and "Have you ever tried to hide?" (*Movement*, 47), which Smith describes as "poems only a Black feminist dyke can write" ("Naming" 102). But at their best, these reviewers share Parker's positional politics, a stance in which identity, through experience, informs but does not circumscribe ideology. Birtha writes, "I want and need much more of Parker's work. . . . I know this is the kind of writing I need, to help me continually reaffirm my own commitment to social change."

No Place to Hide: Questioning Movements from Within

African American lesbians comprise only a portion of Parker's audience, of the movements in which she participated and upon which her poetry comments. If Parker spoke with the force of a preacher, she was not one issuing a sermon to the choir. As a woman and a lesbian she was an outsider to the Black Arts movement, and as an African American lesbian she was marginal to predominantly white segments of the women's movement. In addition to challenging oppressive hegemonic forces like the U.S. government, Parker's poetry addresses the limitations of all the movements and communities within which she fought—African American, feminist, lesbian-feminist, and gay. Parker never left the struggle; she did not allow herself to be forced out, as Grahn comments vis-à-vis Parker's feminism:

Daring to call herself a feminist from the beginning, when even other feminists had swallowed the false line that only white middleclass women need apply—what gall, for a movement which had half its own roots in the Black Power and Civil Rights struggles—Parker remained a feminist anyway—lucky for the rest of us, giving direction, criticism, stamina, impetus, courage, and a spirit of resistance on stage and off. ("Introduction," 14)

Grahn reports having once asked Parker to describe her vision of a revolution. Parker's response, as recalled by Grahn, describes parts of all the movements of the 1960s and seventies taken together, but fits no single one of them:

"If I could take all my parts with me when I go somewhere, and not have to say to one of them, 'No, you stay home tonight, you won't be welcome,' because I'm going to an all-white party where I can be gay, but not Black. Or I'm going to a Black poetry reading, and half the poets are antihomosexual, or thousands of situations where something of what I am cannot come with me. The day all the different parts of me can come along, we would have what I would call a revolution." (Grahn, "Introduction," 11)

Parker's revolutionary goal as a lesbian-feminist leader was never the self-referential safe home of a narrowly construed (or merely stereotypically essentialist) identity politics. Different situations required the assertion of different politics—antiracist, antihomophobic, feminist—and if she understood this because of her multiply located identity, she taught it as a form of activism to others, regardless of who they were.

In 1973, Parker published her vision in the poem "i have a dream" (*Movement*, 83–84). In the first two stanzas, she appears to repudiate revolutionary dreams she has shared in the past.

i have a dream
 no—
 not Martin's
 though my feet moved
 down many paths.
 it's a simple dream—

i have a dream
 not the dream of the vanguard
 not to turn this world—
 all over
 not the dream of the masses—
 not the dream of women
 not to turn this world
 all
 over
 it's a simple dream— (ll. 1–16)

Parker's dream must incorporate the visions of the civil rights, black power, antiwar, and women's movements, because each of them speaks to some part of who she is. The problem with them all, however, is that they are partial.

At worst, they exclude each other's priorities, and none of them includes the dream of lesbian and gay liberation. In stanzas 3 through 7, Parker envisions holding hands with her lover in public, going "to a hamburger stand" without being "taunted by bikers on a holiday" (ll. 21–22) because of her dykish appearance, walking "ghetto streets" without being "beaten up by my brothers" (ll. 27–28), and walking "out of a bar" without being "arrested by the pigs" (ll. 30–31). The idyllic sound of the word *dream* is shattered by the violence that threatens the vision in each stanza. The dreams of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Mao Tse Tung, George Jackson, and Angela Davis have failed Parker because they have not eradicated (and in some instances have perpetrated) the violence that threatens her as a lesbian. By the end of the poem, Parker expresses frustration ("now i'm tired—" l. 44) and anger ("now you listen!" l. 45) at the movements that have failed her. "i have a dream too" (l. 46), she declares, placing herself on par with the revolutionaries she has followed in the past, challenging them to take the step of incorporating her vision; after all, she concludes, "it's a simple dream" (l. 47).

Parker's dream of equality is indeed a simple logical leap from the dream of "justice for all," the American dream invoked by King in his "I Have a Dream" speech, but it has not been a simple task to accomplish, even by the most progressive movements with which Parker was associated. Like Audre Lorde, Parker refused to name herself either with one part of her identity (black or female or working-class or gay or feminist or poet) or with a conglomerate of her many parts (black working-class lesbian-feminist poet). Parker preferred a listing of descriptors, of identity labels as affiliations, strung together with commas—neither cut off from one another nor combined into an assimilable pigeon-(w)hole—unwilling to drop any for the sake of the other, or for a "dream" other than her own.

It is this "multiplicity" of identity, which Parker both sarcastically and earnestly terms "simple," that leads Dymphna Callaghan to compare Parker's work to the postmodern sensibilities of Donna Haraway and others (Callaghan, "Pat Parker," 128, 129). Callaghan correctly points out that Parker's poems intersect with contemporary theorists' resistance to essentialist notions of "woman" (128), but Parker goes even farther. Her self-aware positioning not only opposes "racism, classism, and homophobia" (Callaghan, "Pat Parker," 128), it resists essentializing notions of "African American," "working-class," "lesbian," and all combinations of these categories. The stacking of identities, as in "working-class African American lesbian," performs the crucial task of making visible people who are erased by the false generic term *woman*, but it does not necessarily challenge essential-

ism. Instead, it can lead to more narrowly defined essentialisms, the pretense to knowing who or how "only a Black feminist dyke" can be. Parker's poetry questions each category with which she seems to affiliate, disallowing the easy assimilation of her positional politics to a knowable identity. Judy Grahn understood this in the 1970s, when she wrote,

Parker was making literature out of stuff so buried under American racism and sexism, classism and antilesbianism that it wasn't even a question of breaking down or reversing a stereotype but of filling up a vacuum where the stereotype would have been if it were not *so* frightening for most people to even have such thoughts. ("Introduction," 14)

Barbara Smith hinted at a similar interpretation when she titled a 1978 review of Parker's work "Naming the Unnameable." Parker made her feelings about identity categories explicit in her biographical note to the anthology *Mark in Time* in 1971:

I dislike "schools of writing" and pedantic labeling, i.e., academic, romantic, black mountain, beat, imagist, satirist, black, woman, black woman, etc. If a person can't figure out where I'm coming from after reading my work, then either I've failed or they've failed and definitions of me are unimportant. (183)

The work is often autobiographical and always complex, if seemingly simple because of Parker's diction. Callaghan explicates "My lover is a woman" which explores the contradictions of interracial lesbian relationship, one among many of Parker's poems that is autobiographical without being essentialist, resisting the model of "a confessional revelation of authentic identity fostered by liberal humanism" (Callaghan, "Pat Parker," 132). Parker seems to proclaim who she is, but a more accurate analysis is that she explains where she stands. Her politics of identity is situational, not essentialist.

Parker's outspoken position in 1978 is celebrated by Barbara Smith, who applauds her as "one of a handful of Black women writers who acknowledge their lesbian identity" and calling Parker, among other things, "stunningly brave" ("Naming," 99). In 1975, Parker complained that the critical standards she disdained had "been controlled by *men* for so long," not just white men (Woodwoman, "Pat Parker Talks," 61; emphasis added). A common slogan of the Black Power movement was "I am a man," and the associated Black Aesthetic was for the most part vigorously masculinist. Cheryl Clarke

terms Parker's poetry "a departure from the racist, nationalist radical Afro-American poetry" of the 1970s, "because it dares to present a black lesbian's experience of oppression in the world as well as her vision" ("Review," 224). Parker directly confronted the sexism of radical black poetry and politics from her position as a black lesbian. "For Michael on his third birthday" (*Movement*, 54) begins with the epigraph, "What are you, Michael? / Black and Beautiful." With this four-stanza poem Parker both affirms that "Black is beautiful" and challenges the equation of black and beautiful with male. Three stanzas recall the killing existence of slavery, "Death the only fact" (l. 10), but, in the last stanza, "The gun has turned around," and the poet proclaims "MEN—Beautiful and Black" (ll. 15–16). On the surface, this is a legacy of self-love willed to a black male toddler. But in the context of Parker's critique of sexism in black communities, the "gun . . . turned around" and the capitalization of "MEN" can also be read as the poet turning her critical eye on the disappearance of African American women in the loudly proclaimed black-nationalist focus on "MEN—Beautiful and Black." In this reading, the poem is both an affirmation and an object lesson for the young Michael.

In "Brother" and "Womanslaughter," Parker commits the ultimate movement heresy of naming black men's violence against women. (The topic provoked an outpouring of invective from critics of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in 1982, for one prominent example.) "Brother" illustrates Parker's ability to succinctly diagnose a social ill; the poem literally has a punch line, but it is not of the humorous sort:

Brother

I don't want to hear
about
how *my* real enemy
is the system.
i'm no genius,
but i do know
that system
you hit me with
is called
a fist.

The epigraph to "Brother" comes from Harriet Tubman, one of the women Parker would memorialize by name as a "survivor" in "Movement in Black"

six years later. The implication of the quotation is that the poet, like Tubman, has the tenacity and moral authority to fight to the finish for the "two things I've got a / right to, and these are death / or liberty. One or the other / i mean to have." Barbara Smith states that "Brother" is the sort of poem "that only a Black feminist dyke can write," not because white women are unable to see the problem but because only a Black woman (and, one might add, a Black woman with radical movement experience) could "legitimately criticize supposedly revolutionary Black men who batter women" without being susceptible to accusations of racism ("Naming," 102). Perhaps Smith feels that this poem could only have been written by a "Black feminist *dyke*" because so many radical movement women had come out of the closet by the late 1970s, or perhaps her assessment stems from a lesbian-feminist belief that a lesbian would be more likely to criticize men than a straight woman with a misguided stake in a heterosexist system. Smith does not clarify this point in her review.

Some of Parker's early poems, first collected in *Child of Myself* and reprinted in the section of *Movement in Black* titled "Married," address psychological abuse of women in heterosexual relationships. In "Goat Child" Parker describes the lessons she learned from a husband who offered to teach her "the ways of woman" (l. 356):

i learned hate
 i learned jealousy
 i learned my skills—
 to cook—to fuck
 to wash—to fuck
 to iron—to fuck
 to clean—to fuck
 to care—to fuck
 to wait—to fuck (ll. 358–66)

In "You can't be sure of anything these days" (*Movement*, 36), Parker describes betrayal by "a really far out man" (l. 1) who "Says he wants an intelligent, creative / woman to be his *partner* in life" (ll. 7–8) but then ends up expecting his wife to perform traditional "women's work" (l. 18).

In "Exodus," Parker issues a warning: "Trust me no more— / Our bed is unsafe" (ll. 1–2). By the last stanza, with its ominously unfinished quatrain, the marriage bed is no longer "our bed" but "your bed." When it was "our bed," the self-definition that completed the quatrain was, first, "a cancerous

rage" and, second, "a desperate slave." In the last stanza, the narrator has left the conjugal bed but dares not yet name her new independent self. The quatrain is unfinished, leaving off the last line:

Trust me no more
Your bed is unsafe
Rising from folds of cloth— (ll. 17–19)

By the end of *Child of Myself*, Parker is writing love poems to women, having escaped the "folds of cloth" that represent a repressive role as wife to a sexist man.

Parker's long narrative poem "Womanslaughter" tells the story of an abused wife who did not escape—her sister, who was repeatedly assaulted and finally murdered by her husband.

There was a quiet man
He married a quiet wife
Together, they lived
a quiet life.

Not so, not so
her sisters said,
the truth comes out
as she lies dead.
He beat her.
He accused her
of awful things
& he beat her.
One day she left. (ll. 83–95)

One day a quiet man
shot his quiet wife
three times in the back.
He shot her friend as well.
His wife died. (ll. 141–45)

The husband was convicted of manslaughter for "a crime of passion" (l. 186) rather than murder, because "Men cannot kill their wives. / They passion

them to death" (ll. 231–32). Parker, as feminist griot, remembers and retells an otherwise untold story, one that many black nationalists considered counterrevolutionary because they saw it as maligning black men, already emasculated by white society.

In the final, triumphal stanzas of this otherwise grief-stricken and furiously groping poem, Parker vows to take up and transform the role that would have belonged to her recently deceased father, whose presence is felt in the thrice-repeated quatrain, "'It is good, they said, / that Buster is dead. / He would surely kill / the quiet man'" (ll. 79–82, 150–53, 203–6). Three years after her sister's funeral, Parker writes that she is "again strong" (l. 239), able to act collectively where her father would have lashed out individually and ineffectually:

I have gained many sisters.
And if one is beaten,
or raped, or killed,
I will not come in mourning black.
I will not pick the right flowers.

I will not celebrate her death

.....

I will come with my many sisters
and decorate the streets
with the innards of those
brothers in womenslaughter.

.....

I will come to my sisters,
not dutiful,

I will come strong. (ll. 240–45, 249–52, 256–58)

This final stanza has been criticized for "hammer[ing] home the point too didactically" and, by contrast, lauded as "a declaration of the kind of commitment that will bring about the life-saving revolution," "sum[ming] up the anger of many of us" (Barrax, "Six Poets," 262; Smith, "Naming," 102; South, "Review," 73). It was undoubtedly in the latter spirit that "Womanslaughter" was received at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels in 1976, where Parker read the poem as testimony about violence against women in the United States. "Womanslaughter" also appears in a book published to coincide with the tribunal, *Poetry from Vio-*

lence, in which several women of color, including Dorinda Moreno, Marcela Trujillo, Nellie Wong, and Mitsuye Yamada, write about violence in their communities.

Parker's collective vision in the final stanza of "Womanslaughter" resonates with the themes of many of her poems; specific images and words in the stanza are directly and significantly intertextual with at least six other poems. For example, the lines "No more, can I dull my rage / in alcohol & deference" (ll. 253–54) recall the witty and tragic litany of reasons to drink elaborated in "Pit Stop" (*Movement*, 104–9)—including the desire to drown anger, shame, and sorrow. "Pit Stop" concludes with the narrator excusing herself from the bar because "i cannot afford to lose / this race. / i cannot afford to die, / in this place" (ll. 103–6). "Womanslaughter" gives specific purpose to the renunciation of "alcohol & deference": there are lives to be saved and deaths to be avenged in collective feminist activism, which cannot be executed effectively from a bar stool.

The "innards" with which Parker vows to "decorate the streets" recall the word *innards* in three other poems, "My hands are big" (*Movement*, 43–44), "Don't let the fascist speak" (*Movement*, 63–66), and "i wish that i could hate you" (*Movement*, 124). In each case, Parker uses the word *innards* to symbolize a core sense of self involving childhood memory, oppression, and injustice. By vowing to figuratively disembowel not only the rapist and the murderer but the whole society that supports them ("those brothers in womenslaughter"), Parker pledges to turn the woman-hating status quo inside out, exposing and transforming racist patriarchal culture. By inverting the misogyny of patriarchy's "innards," perhaps the ever present threat of "womanslaughter" would be replaced by "woman's/laughter."⁷

In "My hands are big," Parker explains that she is a product of her upbringing, informed by oppression, unable to fit easily into the pleasant scenario of harmonious feminist sisterhood imagined by women unfamiliar with racism and poverty:

some of
 my sisters see me
 as big & twisted
 rough & torn
 callused & sectioned
 definitely not pleasant,
 to be around— (ll. 7–13)

My hands are big & rough
 like my mother's
 my innards are twisted & torn
 like my father's
 my self is
 my big hands—
 like my father's
 & torn innards
 like my mother's
 & they both felt
 & were—
 & i am a product of that—
 & not a political consciousness (ll. 43–55)

These "innards" are at the core of Parker's self-concept. They are her inheritance from her parents, poor black people who were oppressed, but who in turn persecuted the lesbian daughter who would not listen to them and stay "married & miserable" (l. 29). Contradictory—"twisted / and torn" (l. 45)—as this self-image is, it is part of the baggage Parker carries to the women's movement.

Parker's "Don't let the fascist speak" addresses the sacrosanct liberal principle of unfettered free speech, questioning for whom that right is actually guaranteed. In this poem, Parker figures her "innards" as the site of her visceral memory of racist injustice. When Parker hears "the voices of students / screaming / insults threats / *Let the Nazis speak*" (ll. 8–11), her "innards churn / they remember" (ll. 26–27) the separate and unequal education she received in all-black public schools, police brutality against Black Panthers who were exercising their alleged right to free speech, and "images / of jews in camps— / of homosexuals in camps— / of socialists in camps" (ll. 74–77). Her "innards" as site of memory and of conscience are also the base for moral decision as they make her aware that

there is
 no contradiction
 what the Nazis say
 will cause
 people
 to hurt
 ME. (ll. 114–20)

Finally, in "i wish that i could hate you," a poem about jealousy, her "innards" are the basis for decisions. "i wish that i could hate you / when you brush against me in sleep / your breath slapping life in my innards / & i feel my body go soft in wanting you" (ll. 1-4). Despite any decision she makes with her head, she will follow her gut feeling.

Renaming Love: Poetry in a Women's Tradition

The last three lines of "Womanslaughter"—"I will come to my sisters, / not dutiful, / I will come strong"—echo the intimate lyric "Let me come to you naked" (*Movement*, 120), in which Parker envisions a politicized erotic relationship in which she can freely express various aspects of herself: "naked," "dark," "old," "weak," "angry," "callused," and finally,

even more

Let me come to you strong
come sure and free
come powerful

and lay with you (ll. 13-17)

Both "Let me come to you naked" and "Womanslaughter" appear in the "Love Poems" section of *Movement in Black*, and both reenvision the tradition of women's love lyric. Like Grahn's "grand, muscley" names for love, Parker's love poems are "powerful"; love has the capacity to "give birth / to revolution" ("Metamorphosis," ll. 22-23, *Movement*, 132). Several of Parker's love poems center on romantic and/or erotic relationships, but others are platonic, and some are collective, anonymous, and purely political.

"Gente" (*Movement*, 135) is the first of Parker's love poems to depart entirely from the template of a romantic or erotic relationship. The poem is about a political group of women of color with whom Parker played softball (sudi mae, "We Have," 6-7, 25). Gente formed in 1974 as an alternative to white-dominated sports teams sponsored by lesbian bars, and as a means of socializing primarily with other lesbians of color. According to Grahn, Parker and others organized Gente because of racism within the lesbian-feminist movement. It was among the first groups of its kind, Grahn explains, a precursor to *This Bridge Called My Back*.⁸ Parker writes in the poem "gente" that

"it feels good / to be able to say / my sisters / and not have / *any* reservations" (ll. 21–25). Ironically, "feels good" echoes one of the refrains in "My lover is a woman," in which "feel good" refers to being intimate with her white lover, despite the disapprobation of both women's families and circles of friends. Perhaps the irony is not so great, however, since "My lover is a woman" is specifically about the difficulties of interracial relationships, while "gente" is about the ease of socializing among women of color. Other "love poems" are about learning to overcome racist beauty standards and love oneself ("Group," *Movement*, 136–38), the "contradictions" of "The Law" (*Movement*, 139–40), making peace with her sister's violent death ("Autumn Morning," *Movement*, 151), acquiescing to her dying mother's definition of respect as deference ("when i was a child"), and questioning the limits of feminist "sisterhood" ("there is a woman in this town").

Parker's attention to renaming herself and her world place her squarely in a tradition of women's poetry, as exemplified and explained by Grahn, and as schematized by Pamela Annas in her essay "A Poetry of Survival: Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich." Annas explores the implications for poets of the fact that all language carries cultural assumptions. If the poet is outside the dominant norm—not white, male, and heterosexual—she attempts to "reclaim words and images, to revise the way words are put together as well as the words themselves, to review the whole tradition of poetry, to repossess and inhabit language" ("Poetry," 10). Annas posits five stages of "unnaming and renaming" to describe how women poets achieve this revision, whose "necessity . . . seems clear by now" (10). The stages range from acceptance of dominant norms through dual consciousness, refuting "the other-defined self," redefining and renaming the self, and renaming the world from the perspective of the redefined self ("Poetry," 11–12).

Annas describes Parker's work as "distinguished by a tension between unnaming and renaming" ("Poetry," 19). In this schema, "My Lady Ain't No Lady" is a poem of unnaming, since it defines the poet and her lover against traditional types, the class- and race-laden images of "lady" and "gentleman" (19–20). "Womanslaughter" and "Don't let the fascist speak" both exist "in the contrary and powerful space between unnaming and renaming," a charged form that explores contradictions (21–22). "Movement in Black" is a long exercise in renaming the self (22), while "i have a dream" renames the world, that is, "brings the world, through language, into an alignment with the self" (12). Annas details an observation that most other commentators have made about Parker's poetry: Barbara Smith discusses Parker's "process

of self-creation" ("Naming," 100), Callaghan examines the ways in which "identity" in Parker's work "is at once constituted by affirmation and negation" ("Pat Parker," 134), Lyndie Brimstone remarks on Parker's "relentless search for a definition of self" ("Pat Parker," 4), Joan Nestle states that "for Pat Parker, knowledge of what must be jettisoned is the most powerful starting place" ("Place," 9); I have written elsewhere of Parker's concern with "defining *herself*, in opposition to the ways in which the 'they' of white, straight, male-dominated society would describe us all" ("Giving Voice"). Jay Wright describes a similar tradition in black poetry, in which a figure "suffers the pains of transition from one state of existence to another and strives by some act to gain identity" ("Desire's Design," 17), confirming Cheryl Clarke's observation that Parker writes from and into both black and women's literary traditions ("Review," 217, 224).

"Womanslaughter" is one example of how Parker's work fits into a tradition of feminist and lesbian poetry as well as African American poetry. The poem was modeled after Grahn's "A Woman Is Talking to Death," which is "made the way it is because [Grahn] was already so familiar with" Parker's "Goat Child,"

the first deliberately autobiographical poem by a woman that I had ever heard, although there was no reason (try sexism) why a woman's entire life couldn't be the storyline of a poem, a modern epic. For people hearing it at the time, the idea that women even *had* life stories was amazing and nearly unheard of. (Grahn, "Introduction," 13)

A vital aspect of the lesbian-feminist movement that Parker and Grahn helped to create, according to Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, is the vigorous critique of the movement and of lesbian-feminist communities from within ("Women's Culture," 34). Parker's statement at the end of "Womanslaughter" that "it will matter not / if she's Black or white— / if she loves women or men" (ll. 246–48) hints at a broad critique of lesbian feminism and the larger women's movement. Just as Parker names the sexism and homophobia of African American movements and communities, she names the exclusions of women's communities and organizations. "Parker's way of working," according to Grahn, "has always been to keep her ears open among a community of people,"

and take on the personal responsibility for saying what was on people's minds and important to them. What was not being said other places, or

what was being muddled and needed clarification. And what white women could not hear at a meeting, we just might hear on a stage, boomed through a microphone. What men would not hold still for on the street, they might listen to in a more formal situation. Parker selects the work she reads for its effect on her audience, will it teach us anything—not, will it please us, will we like her, can she entertain us. This does not keep her from using sharply pointed sarcasm, irony, and a variety of hysterically funny senses to make her ideas come across. ("Introduction," 12)

"Have you ever tried to hide?" and "Brother" are printed on facing pages in *Movement in Black*, and the two perform parallel critiques of feminism and the black power movement. While the "punch line" of "Brother" confronts a black man's fist, "Have you ever tried to hide?" ends by shouting "SISTER! your foot's smaller, / but it's still on my neck" (ll. 20–21). While this poem directly confronts the racism of white feminists in the early 1970s, it also acknowledges the participation of other African American women in the movement. Most of the poem, in fact, addresses an African American "you":

Have you ever tried to hide?
 In a group
 of women
 hide
 yourself
 slide between the floor boards
 slide yourself away child
 away from this room
 & your sister
 before she notices
 your Black self &
 her white mind (ll. 1–12)

Parker is describing her reaction to hearing a white woman at a meeting ask, "How do we know that the panthers / will accept a gift from / white—middle—class—women?" a question that rendered Parker and other working-class/women of color in the group invisible.

In "there is a woman in this town," Parker interrogates the willingness of feminists, including herself, to claim all women as their sisters, recalling her stated indifference at the end of "Womanslaughter" to a woman's race or sexual orientation in the name of political solidarity against domestic violence.

In a repeated pattern of four stanzas, Parker sketches a woman, describes the community's response to her, and asks "Is she our sister?":

some say she is lonely
some say she is an agent
none of us speak to her

Is she our sister?

some say she is mis-guided
some say she is an enemy
none of us know her

Is she our sister? (ll. 5–8, 14–17)

The evidence mounts with each cycle: "none of us have loved her / . . . none of us trust her / . . . none of us go out with her / . . . none of us invite her home / . . . none of us have trusted her / Is she our sister?" The poem does not come to a clear resolution, except to indicate that being oppressed does not make a person pure. "Once upon a time, there was a dream" (l. 71), Parker concludes, but this one is not "simple." It is a complicated dream, one that has not worked out in the utopic way its architects had planned, but one that nevertheless "lives for those who would be sisters / it lives for those who need a sister / it lives for those who once upon a time had a dream" (ll. 78–80). The intensity of this poem, like so many of Parker's poems, comes from the brilliantly insightful question, not the answer.

As Jewelle Gomez observes, asking pointed, needling questions is "a power more subtle than the bombast of those who think they have all the answers" (Gomez, "First"). Parker's poem titled, simply, "Questions" (*Movement*, 79–82) asks how to enact the axiom "'Until all oppressed people / are free— / none of us are free.'"

the chains are different now—
lay on this body strange
no metal clanging in my ears

chains laying strange
chains laying light-weight

laying credit cards
 laying welfare forms
 laying buying on time
 laying white packets of dope
 laying afro's & straighten hair
 laying pimp & revolutionary
 laying mother & daughter
 laying father & son

chains laying strange—
 strange laying chains
 chains

how do i break these chains (ll. 1–17)

The question mark is implied in the last line of the section—or is it? Without the punctuation, the line becomes descriptive rather than interrogatory. A presidential proclamation, a civil war, and a constitutional amendment broke the chains of slavery, but the way to end these “different” chains “laying light-weight” seems less straightforward. Without the question mark, they become how-do-i-break-these chains, perplexing social ills without an antidote.

In section 2, the chains are made of sexism, in section 3, they are made of homophobia, and Parker asks/states twice, “how do i break these chains.” In section 4, “the chains are here,” and Parker characterizes them abstractly rather than concretely; they are “chains of ignorance & fear.” In this final section, the lines are clearly questions:

how do i break these chains
 to whom or what
 do i direct pain (ll. 62–64)

sisters—how do i break your chains
 brothers—how do i break your chains

mothers—how do i break your chains
 fathers—how do i break your chains

i don't want to kill—
 i don't want to cause pain—

how—

how else do i break—your chains (ll. 73–80)

Parker returns to the idea of everyone being oppressed by the existence of oppression, as "these chains" have become "your chains." Renouncing a violent solution, Parker calls for all people to take responsibility for addressing the question "how do i"—now *we*—"break—your chains."

Parker's most frequently anthologized poem asks another question, "Where Will You Be?" (*Movement*, 74–78), calling all "perverts" to account for themselves in a repressive society. As in the "Mock Interrogation" section of Grahn's "A Woman Is Talking to Death," perversion here is a sin of omission, of failing to act in the face of danger from without (a fanatically religious, repressive, bureaucratic state) and from within (our complicity with the silencing norms of heterosexism).

They will come in robes
to rehabilitate
and white coats
to subjugate
and where will you be
when they come?

.....

Every time we watched
a queer hassled in the
streets and said nothing—
It was an act of perversion.

Everytime we lied about
the boyfriend or girlfriend
at coffee break—
It was an act of perversion. (ll. 43–48, 57–64)

In the second half of the poem Parker exhibits her disdain for the identity labels behind which people attempt to hide, sounding something like a nineties queer activist/theorist arguing against both the ethics and efficacy of assimilation.

& it won't matter
if you're

homosexual, not a faggot
 lesbian, not a dyke
 gay, not queer (ll. 97–101)

It won't matter
 if you're
 Butch, or Fem
 Not into roles
 Monogamous
 Non Monogamous (ll. 120–25)

They will come for
 the perverts
 and where will
 you be
 When they come? (ll. 139–43)

By focusing incessantly on necessary questions, Parker resisted facile, partial answers, leaving social remedies and personal identities in a state of healthy interrogative flux. She insisted on naming herself black, woman, lesbian, working class, poet, but refused to boil her perspective down to any easily appropriable definition. In her insistence on multiple, shifting identities, Parker was a poet whose grassroots vernacular theorizing prefigured some of the most important insights of queer theory. Like Grahn, she challenged what would later be termed "heteronormativity" by redefining "love poems." Parker also directly called the bluff of normative categories of identity in poems such as "For the Straight Folks" and "For the white person . . ." Parker's class and race politics, directed at both the lesbian community and the larger world, expose as false the stereotype of lesbian feminism as an essentialist, white, middle-class movement. Her own multiply situated, positional politics have much in common with the sort of stance more often associated with the 1990s than the 1970s by most contemporary commentators, demanding a reexamination of an era and a politics that have been written off prematurely as naive and finally irrelevant.